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A POSTSCRIPT ON PRAGMATISM.

IN COMMENT ON PROFESSOR JAMES'S REVIEW OF MARCEL
HEBERT'S BOOK.*

WHILE reading the proofs of the article "The Philosophy of Personal Equation," and preparing the present number for the press, I received from Professor James his reply to Marcel Hébert who he thinks suffers from "the usual fatal misapprehension" of the critics of pragmatism. It is strange that all his critics agree in misinterpreting Professor James's conception of truth. He says:

"How comes it, then, that our critics so uniformly accuse us of subjectivism, of denying the reality's existence? It comes, I think, from the necessary predominance of subjective language in our analysis."

In my critique of pragmatism (*Monist*, XVIII, 320) I have anticipated Professor James's complaint and have therefore avoided recapitulating his views, but always quoted him in his *ipsissima verba*, and if words mean what they say, Professor James is decidedly to be blamed if he has been uniformly misunderstood. I request our readers to go over the definitions given by Professor James himself, and look them up either in my quotations or, better still, in his own book, *Pragmatism*. He says:

* *Le pragmatisme et ses diverses formes anglo-américaines*. Reviewed in *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, Dec. 3, 1908.

"The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons."—*Pragm.* p. 76.

"'What would be better for us to believe'! This sounds very like a definition of truth."—*Pragm.*, p. 77.

"You can say of it then either that 'it is useful because it is true' or that 'it is true because it is useful.'"—*Pragm.*, p. 204.

"A new opinion counts as 'true' just in proportion as it gratifies the individual's desire to assimilate the novel in his experience to his beliefs in stock."—*Pragm.*, p. 201.

"An idea is 'true' so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives."—*Pragm.*, p. 75.

I could continue quotations from all the chapters of Professor James to prove that the language he uses must actually induce his critics to believe that his conception of truth is subjective. But, in his reply to Professor Hébert he says:

"This subjectivist interpretation of our position seems to follow from my having happened to write (without supposing it necessary to explain that I was treating of cognition solely on its subjective side) that in the long run the true is the expedient in the way of our thinking much as the good is the expedient in the way of our behavior! Having previously written that truth means 'agreement with reality,' and insisted that the chief part of the expediency of any one opinion is its agreement with the rest of acknowledged truth, I apprehended no exclusively subjectivistic reading of my meaning."

Judging from this explanation of Professor James, pragmatism agrees after all with the time-worn definition of truth as an idea in agreement with reality. And yet Professor James has declared again and again that pragmatism proposes a new definition of truth. Yea he denies that there is any explanation of truth except in pragmatism. He says in the present review:

"Ours is the only articulate attempt in the field to say positively what truth actually *consists of*."

He italicizes "consists of" to distinguish it from his former definition of truth as "agreement with reality." If we trust him, no one before the appearance of pragmatism had ever a clear idea of what is meant by truth. Especially are his "denouncers" rebuked. He says of them:

"For them, when an idea is true, it *is* true, and there the matter terminates, the word 'true' being indefinable. The relation of the true idea to its object, being, as they think, unique, it can be expressed in terms of nothing else, and needs only to be named for any one to recognize and understand it. Moreover it is invariable and universal, the same in every single instance of truth, however diverse the ideas, the realities, and the other relations between them may be."

The denouncers of Professor James must have strange ideas of truth, for to them, even if "the ideas, realities and other relations" are different, truth remains the same "invariable and universal." I am unfortunate enough never to have seen such use of the word truth, but let us hear what the truth "consists of" according to Professor James. He continues:

"Our pragmatist view, on the contrary, is that the truth-relation is a definitely experienceable relation, and therefore describable as well as namable; that it is not unique in kind, and neither invariable nor universal. The relation to its object that makes an idea true in any given instance, is, we say, embodied in intermediate details of reality which lead towards the object, which vary in every instance, and which in every instance can be concretely traced. The chain of workings which an opinion sets up is the opinion's truth, falsehood, or irrelevancy, as the case may be. Every idea that a man has works some consequences in him, in the shape either of bodily actions or of other ideas. Through these consequences the man's relations to surrounding realities are modified. He is carried nearer to some of them and farther from others, and gets now the feeling that the idea has worked satisfactorily, now that it has not. The idea has put him into touch with something that fulfils its intent, or it has not."

I have quoted this passage in full lest there be any misunderstanding, and here Professor James says explicitly, "The chain of workings the opinion sets up is the opinion's truth, falsehood, or irrelevancy." And then the man "gets now the feeling that the idea has worked satisfactorily, now that it has not."

Here we have two definitions of truth side by side, one is agreement with reality, the other, specifically called "what truth actually consists of," is "the chain of workings which an opinion sets up." It must be noticed that an opinion is not truth and that the application of an opinion to practical life is still less the truth, whether or not it works satisfactorily.

In fact sometimes a positive lie works decidedly satisfactorily. We must remember that ideas are potent factors in the history of mankind. If certain errors are helpful to me it may be to my own profit to spread them and make people believe in them. When by special couriers Rothschild learned of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815, he spread the report through his agents that the French had gained a decisive victory over the allied troops. His own bank began ostentatiously to buy French and sell Prussian consols, but secretly was performing the reverse transactions to a much greater extent. He succeeded in spreading the untruth and it worked satisfactorily and yet we cannot say that thereby it became a truth. Undoubtedly "the idea had put them into touch with something that fulfilled its intent." There was a chain of workings set up, and to the man who pressed the button it worked as calculated.

The idea and the action which it starts (at least so it appears to me) are two different things which in all circumstances have to be kept asunder. I know very well that Professor James has in mind other chains of workings, but any impartial reader will grant—perhaps he himself

will concede—that he uses his words very indiscriminately and in his definition he follows the impulse of the moment.

Some of Professor James's critics seem to have confused the ideas truth and reality, and when noticing the subjective trend in his definition of truth have thought that he had denied the existence of reality outside. He expressly states that he believes in realities and so there need be no quarrel about it, although to him realities are only "objects believed in." Professor James says:

"Since the only realities we can talk about are such objects-believed-in, the pragmatist, whenever he says 'reality,' means in the first instance what may count for the man himself as a reality, what he believes at the moment to be such."

According to this definition, the vision of a dreamer if it is only believed in, is a reality,—of course we must add, "to him," and "at the moment." It may not be a reality to others or to him at another time. Under these circumstances had we not better avoid the phrase "reality to him" and offer in its stead a definition of reality without any qualification, and in contrast to such realities as are *mere* objects believed in?

Professor James is a pluralist, and everywhere he sees the many where scientific method requires us to single out those features which are typical and universal. He further demands the verification of truth by the senses, the reality must be "felt" to be verified.

Mr. Charles S. Peirce showed in articles published about thirty years ago, that there is a certain stage in man's development in which he has not yet an adequate conception of truth, nor does he care to discover the truth. What he cares for is merely a settlement of doubt. Doubt is a state of disturbed equilibrium which causes uneasiness. Doubt must be removed in one way or another and Mr. Peirce calls the settlement of doubt very appropriately, "the fixation of belief." Professor James has confessed

that this same article of Mr. Peirce has influenced him in the formation of his philosophy of pragmatism, and we cannot help thinking that Professor James calls truth what in Mr. Peirce's language is merely "the fixation of belief." Lest we are accused of misrepresenting Professor James's position we will without any further comments quote the following passage in which he answers his critics:

"Sometimes the reality is a concrete sensible presence. The idea, for example, may be that a certain door opens into a room where a glass of beer may be bought. If opening the door leads to the actual sight and taste of the beer, the man calls the idea true. Or his idea may be that of an abstract relation, say of that between the sides and the hypotenuse of a triangle, such a relation being, of course, a reality quite as much as a glass of beer is. If the thought of such a relation leads him to draw auxiliary lines and to compare the figures they make, he may at last, perceiving one equality after another, see the relation thought of, by a vision quite as particular and direct as was the taste of the beer. If he does so, he calls that idea, also, true. His idea has, in each case, brought him into closer touch with a reality felt at the moment to verify just that idea. Each reality verifies and validates its own idea exclusively; and in each case the verification consists in the satisfactorily-ending consequences, mental or physical, which the idea was able to set up. These 'workings' differ in every single instance, they never transcend experience, they consist of particulars, mental or sensible, and they admit of concrete description in every individual case. Pragmatists are unable to see what you can possibly mean by calling an idea true, unless you mean that between it as a *terminus a quo* in some one's mind and some particular reality as a *terminus ad quem*, such concrete workings do or may intervene. Their direction constitutes the idea's reference to that reality, their satisfactoriness constitutes its adaptation thereto, and the two things together constitute the 'truth' of the idea for its possessor. Without such intermediating portions of concretely real experience the pragmatist sees no materials out of which the adaptive relation called truth can be built up."

Professor James speaks also of Professor Schiller of Oxford endorsing his views. He says: "Schiller's doctrine and mine are identical, only our expositions follow different

directions." Of Schiller's conception of truth, Professor James says:

"To be true, it appears, means, for that individual, to work satisfactorily for him; and the working and the satisfaction, since they vary from case to case, admit of no universal description. What works is true and represents a reality, for the individual for whom it works. If he is infallible, the reality is 'really' there; if mistaken it is not there, or not there as he thinks it. We all believe, when our ideas work satisfactorily; but we don't yet know who of us is infallible. Schiller, remaining with the fallible individual, and treating only of reality-for-him, seems to many of his readers to ignore reality-in-itself altogether. But that is because he seeks only to tell us how truths are attained, not what the content of those truths, when attained, shall be. It may be that the truest of all beliefs shall be that in transsubjective realities. It certainly seems the truest, for no rival belief is as voluminously satisfactory, and it is probably Dr. Schiller's own belief; but he is not required, for his immediate purpose to profess it. Still less is he obliged to assume it in advance as the basis of his discussion."

It is astonishing how Professor James ignores the most obtrusive facts of the history of philosophy. To him the pragmatic "is the only articulate attempt in the field to say positively what truth actually consists of," and he assumes that the opponents of pragmatism never thought about truth. In his opinion they simply claim that "when an idea is true, it is true, and there the matter terminates." And with this blank in his information concerning all that has been done in the determination of the nature of truth, he starts the world over again and repeats the errors of the sophists which characterize the pre-Socratic period, the very beginning of the history of philosophy. Note at the same time in the pragmatism of Professor James the exaggerated significance of the part which the senses play in the determination of truth. In a passage just quoted, Professor James emphasizes the word "felt" as if a feeling of fitness were the essential element in the constitution of

truth. He describes the process of discovering truth by saying that "his idea has in each case brought him into closer touch with a reality felt at the moment to verify just that idea." Note here how he clings to the particular, "in each case," and "felt at the moment," and it must be "just that idea." Nor is it enough to use the word "felt"; he also speaks of "touch." So much is he afraid to trust the mental process which would lead him to the universal.

Truth is not of the senses but of the mind. The senses never produce either truth or untruth; it is our faculty of the purely formal (commonly called reason) that works out judgments that are either true or untrue, and we verify these judgments by exactness in the application of logic, arithmetic, geometry, etc. The senses only furnish the data; and if the senses are not sufficiently guided they yield very unreliable results, in evidence of which we refer to so-called sense illusions.

To the pragmatist, truth is always particular, and in the statement endorsed by Professor James, Professor Schiller even goes so far as to say that truths "admit of no universal description." There are many indications that pragmatism cannot distinguish between facts and truths, and this is one of them. We must remember that a statement of fact may be true, but it is not a truth. A truth is always a formulation of the essential features of a set of facts. Truths are not concrete realities, but ideas that appropriately describe certain characteristics of realities, so as to make our anticipations tally with experience in the past and present and even in the future. While facts are always particular, truths are always general; facts are verified by the senses, truths by the mind; facts change, truths (if they were ever real truths and not errors) remain true forever.

We grant that the way to truth is mostly by approximation, and frequently passes through errors. Yea, these

errors are sometimes stoutly believed in with great tenacity and are even forced upon unbelievers by such drastic arguments as dungeon and fagots, but this vigor of conviction never changes them into real truths.

Since Professor James endorses the old definition of truth, apparently forgetful of other utterances he has made, we might come to the conclusion that pragmatism (formerly vaunted as a novel theory of truth) is nothing new after all, and that its sole claim to originality consists in the emphasis laid on the practical application of truth, without which truth is not yet truth were it not for the fact that philosophers and educators from the time of Socrates to the present day have insisted on this point almost *ad nauseam*, so as to make the doctrine that truths must be verified by experience and applied to practical life, trite.

It appears that pragmatism is still in a plastic state, its doctrines are not yet matured and cannot be expected to be consistent; they are developing under our eyes. There is reason to hope that when it has attained years of discretion its conception of truth will look very much like that of the old philosophers, now so ostentatiously decried by our pragmatist friends.

We oppose pragmatism as a philosophy and we criticize its conception of truth. But for all that, we find the movement very interesting and instructive. If pragmatism would not lay claim to being a new philosophy, but if it would merely be a psychological method of determining the establishment of truth in the several philosophies by evaluating the purposes and tendencies under which a philosophy has been formed and taking into consideration the personal equation of the several thinkers, we would recommend it as an extremely practical and useful method. The public at large is too apt to overlook that the purpose of science is its practical application. Man is not a purely intellectual animal. His intellect, including all the truths

he can establish, serves the purpose of enhancing his life. Accordingly the most important part of every philosophy will always be its pragmatistical aspect, and this is a truth which has been recognized since time immemorial, except that now and then it is forgotten. The easiest way to reconstruct the several philosophies of past ages will be to point out the needs of the generation, the duties with which it was confronted, the tasks which had to be performed, and if we bear these practical points in mind we are not likely to misunderstand if in one period emphasis is placed on one special aspect of the truth, while at another the very opposite may come to the fore-ground. And this is true mainly in those branches of philosophy which are of a practical nature, ethics, pedagogy, religion, the policy of the churches, political economy, etc. Pragmatism as a philosophy is an evidence of this. In emphasizing the practical significance of truth, it goes so far as even to deny the value of theory, of consistency, systematization, etc., and when taken to task, Professor James naively declares that the old definition of truth has to be taken for granted.

EDITOR.